



“Mumbai’s Other Half” **(<http://www.avsarindia.org/new/Refer.htm>)**

By Paul Thottakara

I volunteered in Mumbai, through AVSAR, after my first year of medical school. I have to admit I really didn’t know much about Mumbai, aside from the fact that it was home to both Bollywood and “Asia’s largest slum”. I guess it was the dichotomy of the city that drew me in. If you drive from the international airport in the northern suburbs of Mumbai towards South Mumbai you can see exactly what I mean. The landscape shifts back and forth between sprawling slums packed tightly with two-tier shacks to new high rise buildings and western-style shopping malls. Through my experiences with AVSAR in Mumbai I came to learn about the problems overwhelming this city and its’ large slum-dwelling population.

With the help of AVSAR I was connected with a Mumbai NGO called NASEOH (National Society for Equal Opportunities for the Handicapped). Their focus is primarily in helping to educate and advocate for the disabled in Mumbai, a marginalized group that has really benefited from NASEOH. One of their missions is education, and I was lucky enough to teach English to some of the students at NASEOH. However, the organization is also deeply committed to reaching out to the surrounding community. Near to NASEOH’s facilities are several slum communities lacking in the areas of healthcare access, sanitation and education. NASEOH has worked with these communities to identify health and social problems.

When I arrived at NASEOH they had just identified a new community of people and wanted to establish a relationship in order to help address their needs. Another AVSAR volunteer and I were given a project to introduce NASEOH to this community by conducting health and sanitation workshops, listening to the complaints of the people and also determining what problems needed to be addressed. I was taken aback when first walking through the community. Narrow gullies lined by open gutters, snaking through rows of single room, windowless shacks. That initial shock at seeing the terrible living conditions faded somewhat as I made repeated visits to the community and was able to put names, faces and stories to the surroundings. Communication was difficult most of the time since I knew very little Hindi and very few of the people in the community spoke English. But with the help of my fellow AVSAR volunteer Anubha and two of my English students from NASEOH, Nilish and Deepak, I was able to ask and answer questions.

Once we learned about the problems with sanitation (open gutters, lack of toilets) and other problems we advocated on behalf of the community by meeting with government

officials in the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) who were responsible for the sanitation in the area. It was interesting, and sometimes frustrating, to see how the politics and bureaucracy of Mumbai government operated. We were able to make small steps toward improving the community, getting the BMC to clean the gutters and spray for mosquitoes. These were minor successes, but we hoped that more importantly it planted the idea with the people in the community that they could be more proactive and work with the BMC to address their problems. It was an eye-opening experience for me, and I now understand a little better the complexity of dealing with the problems that poverty present. Though I may have had only a tiny impact on Mumbai, Mumbai had an enormous impact on me.

AVSAR made the volunteering experience in Mumbai much easier and enjoyable. AVSAR made the connection with the NGO I volunteered with, arranged my housing, orientation to the city, and was there to support myself and the other volunteers throughout the whole experience. I hope that AVSAR continues to expand and receive support from around the world. I think they provide a valuable bridge for international volunteers to come to Mumbai and connect with its' local NGOs who are doing very important and valuable work.

Paul a first year medical student at the University of Michigan Volunteered with AVSAR and NASEOH in the month of July' 2006. Paul can be reached at jthottakara@yahoo.com



Note: A group of children from Vastalatai Nayak Nagar Colony gather for a hygiene workshop.